

Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) used his moment in the national spotlight to lay out a bleak view of the nation's fiscal health, saying the only cure is a conservative vision that relies on slashing government spending and reducing the size of government.

The 40-year-old Budget Committee chairman was chosen to give the Republican rebuttal to the State of the Union speech on Tuesday night because he is seen as an appealing, young visionary on federal spending. Yet while his speech sounded familiar conservative themes — “limited government and free enterprise have helped make America the greatest nation on earth” — Ryan did not lay out any bold new fiscal programs.

He did not mention Social Security or Medicare — the biggest drivers of the U.S. deficit — and he did not propose any specific budget cuts, nor did he say exactly how much Republicans would cut federal spending. Instead, he gave a dreadful view of the current deficit, bashed Democrats for a “spending binge” and promised that Republicans “will cut spending to get the debt down” and “help create jobs and prosperity.”

Yet his hopeful words about the Republican vision were coupled with a pessimistic view of the economy.

“We face a crushing burden of debt,” Ryan said. “The debt will soon eclipse our entire economy, and grow to catastrophic levels in the years ahead....We hold to a couple of simple convictions: Endless borrowing is not a strategy; spending cuts have to come first.”

Ryan also used his speech to take a shot at the health reform law, saying: “Costs are going up, premiums are rising, and millions of people will lose the coverage they currently have. Job creation is being stifled by all of its taxes, penalties, mandates and fees.”

Ryan's nationally televised rebuttal comes he prepares to take a prominent role in writing the GOP budget while countering President Barack Obama's fiscal 2012 budget proposal next month. Republicans hope that he will set the table as the House confronts the president and his presumed allies in the Democratic-controlled Senate, in what looms as the most dramatic budget debate since the Republican-controlled Congress shut down the government in 1995.

Ryan did not sugar-coat the challenge. “Our nation is approaching a tipping point. We are at a moment, where if government’s growth is left unchecked and unchallenged, America’s best century will be considered our past century,” Ryan said in his speech delivered across the street from where Obama spoke to Congress.

And he delivered harsh criticism of Obama’s policies as president and his huge increases in federal spending. “Yet after two years, the unemployment rate remains above 9 percent and government has added over \$3 trillion to our debt.”

As an ally of many of the 87 Republican freshmen—and even an icon to many for his cerebral approach and his willingness to tackle federal spending—Ryan gave early hints of how he will seek to reshape the federal budget.

“We owe you a better choice and a different vision. Our forthcoming budget is our obligation to you – to show you how we intend to do things differently, how we will cut spending to get the debt down, help create jobs and prosperity, and reform government programs,” Ryan said.

With Ryan’s small-town background in Janesville Wisconsin, Republicans hoped that his homespun appeal would elicit support for traditional American values. “We believe, as our founders did, that ‘the pursuit of happiness’ depends upon individual liberty; and individual liberty requires limited government,” Ryan said.

But the rebuttal speech is often a risky gig for a member of the opposition party. It often comes across as very small in wake of the pageantry of the president’s address to the House chamber, and the speech is often panned by critics — like Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal’s stilted response in 2009.

The stagecraft of Tuesday night’s speech—with Ryan seated in Room 210 of the Cannon Office Building—was designed to send at least two messages. Its stark image offered a simple message that was designed to attract the viewer’s attention. By contrast, the past two Republican responses to President Obama were cluttered by a busy background: Gov. Bob McDonnell (R-Va.) spoke last year from the floor of the House of Delegates, and Jindal (R-La.)

in 2009 stood in the governor's mansion in Baton Rouge.

And with Ryan speaking from the House Budget Committee's hearing room, Republicans could highlight their plans to slash federal spending in that room, and that panel's failure to approve (or even propose) a budget resolution last year when Democrats were in charge.

"We are at a moment, where if government's growth is left unchecked and unchallenged, America's best century will be considered our past century," Ryan said. "This is a future in which we will transform our social safety net into a hammock, which lulls able-bodied people into lives of complacency and dependency."

Democrats, for their part, have shown in recent days that they will challenge the new directions that Ryan has offered, with his much-publicized "roadmap" of federal budget overhaul. The criticisms have been especially harsh from Senate Democrats, who have focused on Ryan's call for major changes in Social Security and Medicare. Those attacks could set up the expected showdown between the two chambers in the politically-split Congress.

Republicans also hoped that the earnest and middle-American Ryan would project an authoritative and convincing tone—as well as the concern of a father of three young children who "will inherit a stagnant economy and a diminished country," he told his audience. **"Paul is the best among us," said Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.), a budget hawk. "He is as bright, genuine and articulate as any member."**

When he chairs his first hearing Wednesday morning as the committee focuses on the fiscal impact of the new health-reform law, Ryan will start to assert his prerogatives as chairman to shape the debate—and, ultimately, to attempt to overhaul federal spending and policy.

But he did not have the partisan stage entirely to himself in his response to Obama. Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-Minn.) planned an online broadcast at the Tea Party Express website—an action that might dilute attention to Ryan and stir unhappiness among Republican leaders.